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OUTLOOK

Commentary and Opinion

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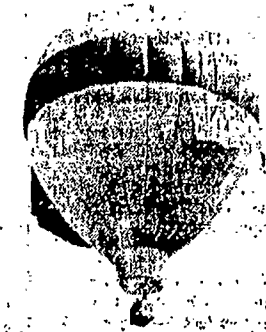
They Go Where the Wind Blows

A brief history of ballooning for children (and adults).



ASPEN, Colo.—By September, when sunshine has bleached all marks previously made by schooling on children, parents seek ways to insinuate edification into entertainment. Thus the three Will children recently found themselves hanging beneath a hot-air balloon in a wicker basket so small they could not dodge a little learning.

Ballooning, like skiing and sailing, involves collaboration between the individual and natural forces. Except for episodic bursts from the propane heater, balloonists experience a stillness more pure than that of a meadow. And there is the luxurious dependence on wind. It is luxurious because it removes the burden of decision: you go whither the wind tends. Best of all, ballooning gives dad an opportunity to be didactic to a captive audience.

Ballooning is a booming pastime, as it should be (say I, as the children's eyes begin to glaze) in the Constitution's bicentennial summer. Ballooning captured the Founders' imagination as an expression of freedom. John Jay, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams and his son John Quincy saw some of the earliest balloonists while negotiating the Treaty of Paris in 1783. George Washington, a better president than meteorologist, anticipated a day when "our friends at Paris will come flying through the air instead of ploughing the ocean."

At first, would-be balloonists believed it was smoke itself, not heat, that pushed ashes up chimneys, so they fueled fires beneath balloons with old shoes and rotten meat. Then when they got their physics straight, they had a moral problem to solve.

In 1783, a balloon made a sheep, a duck and a rooster the planet's first air travelers. Louis XVI, who was a bit pre-*Miranda* in his thinking, wanted to send up a criminal, in case flight proved unhealthy for humans. However, a marquis convinced the king that the honor of succeeding where Icarus had failed belonged to the gently born.

So on Nov. 21, 1783, two gentlemen made mankind's first flight, rising from the Bois de Boulogne in front of Louis, Marie Antoinette and 400,000 others—approximately the population of Paris. Two years later, in a balloon using "flammable air"—hydrogen—one of the two gentlemen became the first person to die in an air crash.

On June 24, 1784, Edward Warren, a 13-year-old Baltimorean, went aloft in a tethered balloon, thereby becoming the first American to take flight from the Republic's soil. It is not recorded if he also was the first American air traveler to have his luggage lost.

As the balloon floats over elk herds on the mountain slopes below, the children, fascinated by the physics, enthralled by the history and awed by the beauty, pepper father with questions: When is breakfast? Where is breakfast? What is for breakfast? To the undisguised dismay of the children, their questions elicit yet another freshet of information from father.

He says that it is a tradition to have wine and food at the end of a balloon voyage. The tradition reflects the fact that when early balloons, belching smoke, landed unannounced on farmers' fields, the farmers often concluded, not unreasonably, that the balloons were Satan's devices.

The farmers attacked the balloons, and sometimes the balloonists, with pitchforks. So balloonists carried food and drink with which to appease the farmers.

Such is mankind's inclination to put all inventions at the disposal of Mars that even the silent, graceful balloon has been pressed into war service. Balloons were used for surveillance of enemy lines during the Civil War. They were used for getting passengers and mail in and out of Paris when the city was besieged by the German army in 1870.

Furthermore (a word that causes the children to flinch in anticipation of still more information), in late 1944 and early 1945 the Japanese launched thousands of bomb-carrying gas balloons high into the jet stream over Japan. Only 285 made the 6,000-mile voyage, scattering along the coast of the United States and Mexico. On May 8, 1945, six Oregonians discovered one and became the only people killed on American soil by enemy action in the Second World War.

Warming to his theme, father is about to explain the cultural importance of the fact that until construction of the Eiffel Tower, balloonists were the only people who had seen a city from higher than the highest rooftop. But father subsides, knowing that all information bounces harmlessly off the invisible shells that surround children in summer, protecting them from mental improvement.

However, if around Labor Day you belabor your children with information, they may regard school as a refuge where teaching is at least not attempted by a parent, who is supposed to be a friend and so should not do that.

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